

## Facilitation Tips for Building Consensus

from our experience

Consensus is one way of making decisions - there are several other ways. It is important to decide when to go for consensus and when to use one of the others approaches. It is also important to decide what the group will do if, finally, there proves to be no consensus.

A consensus cannot be forced. If the usual way of doing things is for management or government officials or community leaders to make the decisions it on behalf of the group, it will likely require time and education for a group to begin to operate with a consensus approach.

As facilitators and as leaders of the group, we can set the stage, provide methods that ensure participation, and make it easier for people to work together. (The word *facilitator* comes from the Latin word, *facilis* - to make easy.)

Following are suggestions or tips that can help set the stage for consensus-making.

- ☐ Give people ample time to get as clear as possible on the "objective facts and data" of a situation in order to have solid ground to think and move from. This includes what is underneath these facts - why people understand things to be this way. Avoid assuming that everyone has the same information. If there is no agreement on the facts, that needs to be acknowledged and if possible remedied.
- ☐ Invite all perspectives to be heard.
- ☐ Give people the opportunity to "work" or "play" with ideas before making decisions. The *Group* phase of the *ToP® Consensus Workshop* builds relationships among the pieces of data and provides an opportunity for dialogue among participants. The question being asked is: are we clear about what people are saying and what relationships we see among ideas. In this phase, all ideas can and should be accepted, even if some of the group disagrees. It is a time to hear and try to understand all perspectives.
- ☐ When appropriate, ask people to write their ideas on paper and post rather than scribing on a flipchart. It encourages people to think exactly how they want to say something rather than "shooting from the hip". It also helps set the tone of participant responsibility.
- ☐ Another way to build relationships among ideas is to facilitate a conversation after a group has heard several reports in which they look for common threads or themes or ideas that build on each other. The intent of this is to give people

a chance to work with the ideas without their being directly associated with the person who puts it forth. This can help to defuse personal attacks that frequently become the focus of the group.

- ☐ Look for the positive aspects of an idea or plan before the negative.
- ☐ Consider using a phrase such as creating *Guidelines for Our Work Together*, or some such phrase rather than creating *Groundrules*. Language is powerful and much more subtle than we frequently realize. "Rules" implies we'll need something or someone with authority for it to be possible for us to do the work rather than being able to manage ourselves.
- ☐ When the group gets stuck or reaches a roadblock, put the question to them as to how they can resolve it or move forward. It is surprising how a group can resolve issues if they understand it is their responsibility and no one is going to assume the responsibility for them. (This assumes that the group wants to move forward, to arrive at some level of consensus.)
- ☐ When a group arrives at a consensus, be sure to write it out so people can see it as well as have it read and agree that is what they are saying.

This does not pretend to be a comprehensive list and none of the above are "silver bullets". Rather, they help create a tone or atmosphere of safety and people taking responsibility for themselves and their situation.

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